

Walking into Creative Writing

Abstract

This short article sets out the methods that I have developed as part of my creative walking-writing practice. Psychogeography plays an important role in my practice research and outputs: my creative writing is deeply invested in sense of place, as well as the effects of environment upon the psychology and self-identity of characters and narrators.

Walking into a creative writing practice

My writing practice involves walking as a creative method and draws upon psychogeographical theory. I use a variety of ambulatory writing practices, ranging from practical, material-gathering activities - such as walking for inspiration and topographical, site specific research - to more experimental exercises - such as using the rhythms of walking and interventions of terrain to inform and shape a piece of writing. I write fiction, poetry and creative nonfiction, as well as crossover forms, all of which incorporate aspects of walking as creative method.

My walking methods draw upon the psychogeographical *dérive* or drift, which, in its simplest form, is a loose walk that follows curiosity and interest rather than a fixed path or set destination. This suggests a certain freedom of access to and inhabiting of public space, and in line with this, the *dérive* has been criticised by feminist writers as hetero-patriarchal, perpetuating the privileged gaze.¹ I am conscious of this association and seek to recast the drift as immersive, sensitising and attending to place and ambience, or applying provocations, agitations and playful aspects to the practice. While it is impossible to throw off the body within which one walks – and the levels of privilege that this attains to – my methods consciously push against ambivalence and entitlement.

Attentive walking

I first define attentive walking in my 2015 article 'Walking against the current' as a method of walking 'without agenda' that differs from *flânerie*.² Attentive walking embraces the

heightened awareness that walking brings, combining the psychogeographical drift with an openness to the sensory, physiological, psychological and aesthetic experiences of place. It lends itself to speculative and site-specific responsive writing, which I generate through ambulatory note-taking, word mapping, freewriting and stream-of-consciousness text. While the written word tends to privilege visual experience, walking facilitates sensory experiences at large. This makes it an ideal method for accessing details of place – including textures, smells, sounds and associated emotions – which can be captured through ambulatory, sensory writing and transmitted to the reader.

Attitudinal walking

I have defined attitudinal walking as ‘walks or walking practices employing one or more conscious intentions or attitudes’³. Attitudinal walking lends itself directly to conscious topographical or material research, as well as more complex creative intentions such as walking ‘with’ a chosen concept or research question, and walking ‘in’ or ‘as’ character (see below). Attitudinal walking also includes the use of constraints, such as instructions to disrupt walking and promote a particular intention or attitude.

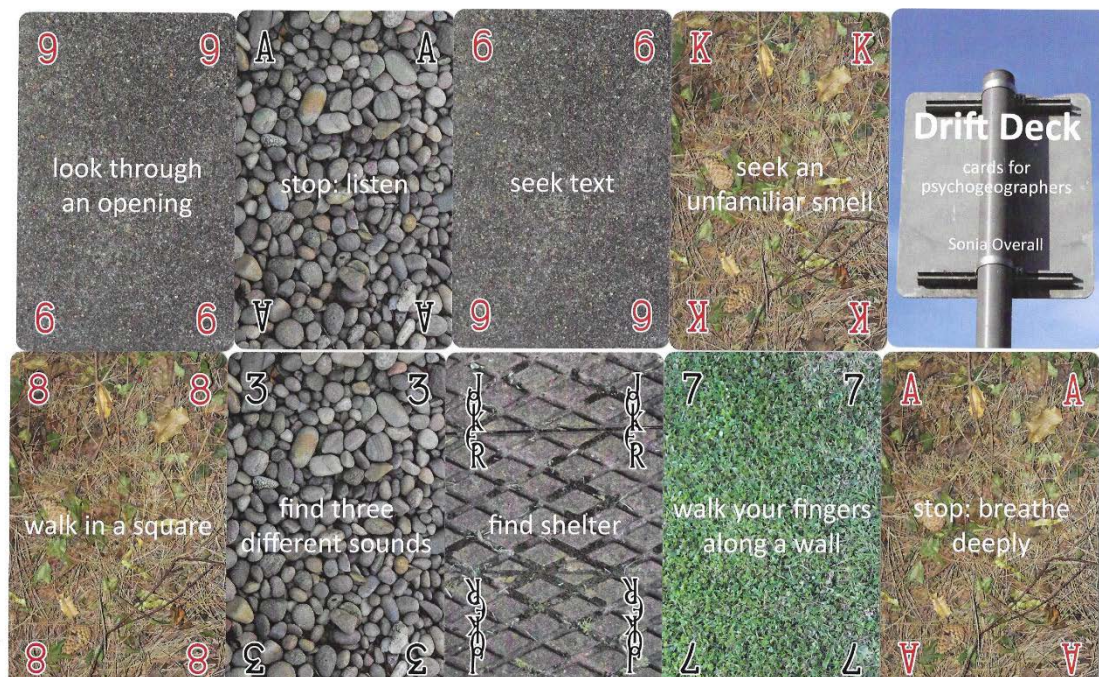
Ludic, haptic and totemic walking

Crossing attentive and attitudinal walking methods is my use of ludic approaches to writing-walking. My ludic walking methods draw upon the spirit of playfulness and chance seen in Dadaist experimental writing methods, and in the concept of play in poetry and art forms discussed by Huizinga in *Homo Ludens*⁴. This has evolved from using randomised instructions to disrupt dérives (primarily when used as a teaching tool) and embrace playfulness and chance, encouraging forms of experimentation.

I developed this ludic method further with the production of my *Drift Deck*. *Drift Deck* is a pack of playing cards drawing on ludic and divinatory practices, used to disrupt walks and encourage attentive walking by seeking out sensory detail.

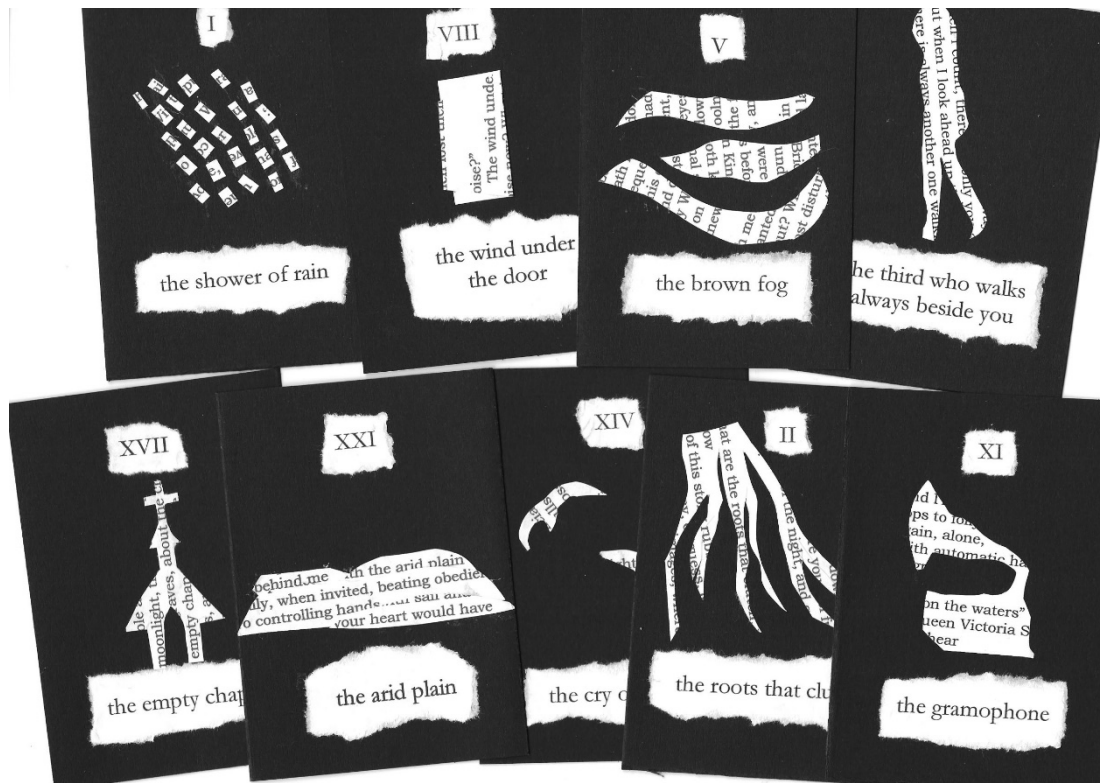
Each playing card suit in the deck relates to environmental interaction through movement, as well as touching, smelling, listening and looking. While a card may instruct the reader to seek out textures and surfaces, both the individual card and the deck as a whole are objects to be carried in the hand while walking, connecting the attentive seeker-walker with an

attitudinal intention through touch. *Drift Deck* therefore serves a haptic function. The carried deck or individual card is also totemic, representative of the 'sought'. As well as offering connections with place that can be recorded through written responses (a found text poem or generating setting for a narrative, for example), *Drift Deck* can also provide prompts for experimental walking 'in' or 'as' character (see below).



I have employed haptic and totemic elements in public performance and research walks, including walking with objects and carrying totemic seed words to connect walkers with specific intentions. In my own writing practice, I have found that walking with haptic and totemic elements related to themes, characters or incidents in a creative piece enables another level of connection to them. This can be something as direct as walking with a small object 'owned' by a character, or more loosely, walking with a totemic item as an act of thinking-through and problem-solving themes or scenarios.

In *Bibliocartomancy*, I combined the card-deck form developed in *Drift Deck* with text cut-up, providing participants with totemic text objects for walking with T.S. Eliot's poem *The Waste Land*, as part of a community curatorial project⁵. This enabled a playful disruption of the *dérive*, seeking resonance in the environment through lines from Eliot's poem.



Labyrinth walking

Labyrinths can provide useful constraints in both attentive and attitudinal walking⁶. The use of instructions, seed words or deliberate intentions, combined with the physical restrictions of the labyrinth, provide a clear focus. By extension, the labyrinth can be used as a constraining device, akin to Oulipo experiments in text generation, but one which is *walked*, and thus embodied⁷.

By contrast, a 'loose' labyrinth walk fosters wide creative responses. In this approach, the shape of the labyrinth removes all decision-making from the walker, facilitating freedom of ambulant thought. The labyrinth's form can be read as a visual metaphor for life journeys in which the walker must move forward without a clear sense of how the path will unfold. Walking the labyrinth can thus act as allegory, offering a device in the writing of memoir, for example.

Walking 'in' and 'as'

Walking 'in' character, the writer walks 'like' their character, comparing experiences. To walk 'in' character is to take on a role and consciously experience place through this lens.

Walking 'as' character is an attitudinal method that consciously removes the veil separating writer and character: the writer *becomes* them, embodying the character fully, moving and seeing as they do. Unlike walking 'in' character in the landscape of the fiction, walking 'as' can be attempted anywhere. The embodiment can function regardless of setting.⁸

Writing as conceptual practice

Graeme Sullivan uses the term 'conceptual practices' to describe the act of the artist thinking 'in the medium'.⁹ The making and the thinking become one. It might be supposed that the medium of the written word offers less fluidity than conceptual expression through mark-making, modelling, movement or musical improvisation. Thinking 'aloud' and recording improvised phrasing can remove some of the distance that the act of writing places between idea and articulation: but for me, freewriting and ambulant writing bring the making and thinking together, directly on the page.

I hope that the ambulant creative writing methods I have outlined here, which constitute my conceptual practice of walking-making-thinking, prove useful to other writers. Walking with an idea or character is a simple beginning; heighten this experience by carrying a connecting object as you walk. Walk in character; walk as character. Seek new interactions with place to sharpen your senses, refresh your descriptive writing and engage directly with setting. Experiment with walking constraints to explore and challenge the shape and rhythm of lines. Walk to fuel your writing and write as you walk. Whichever approach you use, playfulness is key.

¹ Springgay, Stephanie and Truman, Sarah E., 'On the Need for Methods Beyond Proceduralism: Speculative Middles, (In) Tensions, and Response-Ability in Research',

Qualitative Inquiry, 24.3 (2018) pp.203 –214

<<https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/1077800417704464>>.

² Overall, Sonia, 'Walking against the current: generating creative responses to place'

Journal of Writing in Creative Practice, 8.1, 2015, pp.11-28 (p.14).

³ *Museum of Walking*, <<https://www.museumofwalking.org.uk/glossary>> [accessed 14 September 2019].

⁴ Huizinga, Johan, *Homo Ludens: a study of the play element in culture* (Boston: The Beacon Press, 1955).

⁵ Project details can be found at Penfold, Elspeth, 'Walking with *The Waste Land*',

<<http://elspethpenfold.blogspot.com/2018/04/looking-for-magic-in-everyday-through.html>> [accessed 14 September 2019].

⁶ Overall, Sonia, 'Writing and Walking the Labyrinth', *Learning with the Labyrinth: Creating Reflective Space in Higher Education*, ed. by Jan Sellers and Bernard Moss (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), pp.119-123.

⁷ Oulipo – or 'Ouvroir de Littérature Potentielle' (Workshop of Potential Literature) – sought to find new writing expressions through mathematical applications and constraints. Formed in 1960, founding members included Raymond Queneau and François Le Lionnais.

⁸ Overall, Sonia, 'The Walking Dead, or why psychogeography matters', in *Re-enchanting the Academy*, ed. by Simon Wilson and Angela Voss (Auckland: Rubedo Press, 2017), pp. 349-366.

⁹ Sullivan, Graeme, 'Making Space: The Purpose and Place of Practice-Led Research', in *Practice-Led Research, Research-Led Practice in the Creative Arts*, edited by Hazel Smith and Roger T. Dean (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2009), pp.41-65 (p. 50).

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